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Sea Breezes

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The Double-Dipper, A Military Hero

The retirement of Admiral Stan Turner on 1 January while continuing to serve the President as a civilian Director of Central Intelligence once again focuses national attention on "double-dipping," the retired military officer holding a federal job and thus drawing a portion or all of two federal paychecks. With so much misinformation flying around on the subject, we thought we had better try to set the record straight.

In a nutshell, we think the "double dipper"—odious term—is a modern American hero doing a valuable service for his government and saving the taxpayer a pile of dough by doing it. If the government is seriously trying to cut the cost of military retirements, the administration should encourage dual employment, not castigate it. But we're getting ahead of our story.

The Dual Compensation Law came on the books originally as part of the Economy Act of 1932. The government, in the depths of the Depression, was trying every possible way to make ends meet. All Federal salaries—even mids at the Academy—were arbitrarily docked 10%, and that buck a month cut looked big. It was pure gimmickry aimed strictly at the non-complaining and largely non-voting regular officer. Enlisted men were exempt; Reserves were exempt; temporary officers were exempt, which left almost nothing but the Academy grad regular. In later years, some of the most punitive parts of the Act were eased a bit but the principle, the loss of almost half of one's retired pay, is still a highly selective class action against the regular.

The press today focuses its ire on the retired officer, but the overwhelming majority of people who will suffer if dual employment is banned—besides the taxpayer—are the retired enlisted in Civil Service jobs as postmasters, wardens in federal prisons and the like. These men badly need both incomes to survive. Many are at the national poverty level even with both salaries.

We all understand the problem of the

high cost of military retirements today. We citizens are paying the price of large standing armies in peacetime necessary for our security. We are paying for early retirements necessary to keep our armed forces viable, and we pay for increasing life spans after retirement. To ease the cost the obvious solution is to capitalize on this highly trained and experienced labor pool by making second careers possible, not by preventing them. The ideal place for that work force is in the federal government.

The Israeli Defense Forces, for example, beset by hostile armies on all frontiers, realize that a young, dynamic army, navy and air force is vital for the country's survival. Their upper age limit is about 54 years. At that time an easy option is available for transfer into civilian government service. Manpower is too critical an asset simply to cast these people loose. No nation can be so wealthy as to waste its personnel resources as we do in America.

What we suggest here is obvious. Instead of harassing the military retired who seek federal civil employment, we should do everything possible to encourage their services in government. It is not a question of displacing career civil service from their jobs. Ex-military need no favoritism in the job mart. Their training and experience will give them all the advantage they need. They can compete on equal terms with any job seeker; but they should not be penalized by loss of almost half of their retired pay if they accept a federal job.

How does the taxpayer make out? Just fine, thanks. First, the military retired in Civil Service has already earned his retirement. He may eventually qualify for a second retirement in Civil Service also, but he must then choose one or the other, not both. The taxpayer saves the cost of the other retirement. Under present law, the taxpayer also saves up to half the military retired pay, which must be sacrificed while holding the Civil Service job.

President Carter doesn't understand these facts. The military has never spoken out on its (and the taxpayer's) side of dual employment. The President, compounding bad staff advice with worse judgment, spoke in the Pentagon courtyard recently to military and government civilians during their lunch break. He

could only suggest, "One thing I promise you is to put an end to 'double-dipping'."

However hard the administration tries to cut the cost of military retirements, plans offering budget reductions which start in the next century just don't raise much political interest. The politician can't see past the next election. But if the administration and the Congress truly wish to give the taxpayer a break, they can reduce the budget tomorrow by capitalizing on and not stigmatizing the skilled labor force of ex-military which is already at hand.

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